

Today's first reading recounts the first Christian baptisms in the Bible. It's true John the Baptist came earlier, but he baptized people searching more generically for God, not specifically for Jesus. In Acts of the Apostles we meet Christian baptism. On Pentecost day, Peter left the upper room with the other disciples filled with the Holy Spirit, walked into town and preached his first sermon. He told people they were sinners, but if they believed that Jesus was sent by God, they could be saved. 3,000 people changed their ways that day, and accepted baptism. The first Christian baptisms meant this: people left one way of life and began another.

Ask people today what baptism means and you generally hear two answers: entrance into the body of Christ; or cleansing from original sin. The second answer follows the first: if baptism brings you into the body of Christ, you must leave behind some state outside the body of Christ. We called that state original sin. St. Augustine so feared it in the fourth century that he popularized infant baptism, lest children die before joining the body of Christ. During the Middle Ages those fears climaxed with people who believed that if children died before baptism they'd never make it to heaven; but since they weren't responsible for their sin they couldn't go to hell; so they theorized another place for babies which they called limbo. The church never officially adopted that explanation--no church council or pope ever taught it. But it remained popular for centuries, because the church never officially refuted it either. Only in the newest revision of our funeral rites do we find prayers for a baby who dies before baptism. It's the closest the church has ever come to saying, "Don't worry about them." Especially if parents intended to baptize the child, we're confident that all the benefits of baptism apply.

Baptism was much simpler when Peter first introduced it, but its basic meaning remains the same. It celebrates leaving one way of life behind and embracing another. It lays a challenge to us all that we be recognized as the body of Christ not just by the baptism we share, but by <sup>fulfilling</sup> the kind of life baptism calls us to lead.

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